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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Welcome, colleagues, to the 106th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights and the beginning of our sixth annual Iran Accountability Week.

I want to mention the presence of the Honourable Irwin Cotler, who is no stranger to this subcommittee.

While our focus during this week's hearings will be the Iranian regime's deplorable record of domestic human rights abuses, we also take note of the regime's increasing export of violence and terror.

In the last year, Iran's role as a destabilizing force in the Middle East, and specifically Syria, has become increasingly alarming as its state sponsorship of terror has continued to expand. In particular, the activities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and its proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah, have caused immense suffering for millions of people in the Middle East.

Iran's activities in Syria and support of the Assad regime's brutal repression of the Syrian people has been called one of the greatest concerns for geopolitical stability and security in the world today.

On the domestic front, this past December, 3,700 Iranian demonstrators calling for their democratic rights were arrested, including women and girls calling for equal rights. Those protesters have become subject to Iran's vindictive judicial system, including the notorious Evin prison, where Canadian citizen Dr. Kavous Seyed-Emami died in February. His wife, Canadian citizen Maryam Mombeini, remains in Iran against her will.

As the human rights subcommittee, we want to be on the record that human rights abuses in Iran are always top of mind. We want to express our solidarity with the Iranian people, among them the many political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, and human rights defenders who work tirelessly in Iran and abroad, and at great personal cost, for the promotion and protection of and respect for human rights in their country.

To begin our hearing, we have two witnesses before us. By video conference from London, we have Professor Payam Akhavan, co-founder of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, and, in person, Mark Dubowitz, CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Professor Akhavan, if you begin with your opening remarks, we'll then move to Mr. Dubowitz, and then proceed straight to questions from the members. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Payam Akhavan (Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, McGill University, As an Individual): Mr. Chair and honourable committee members, thank you for the invitation. It's a privilege for me to appear before you once again. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation for your continued attention to the human rights situation in Iran.

[*English*]

Exactly 50 years ago, in May 1968, the first international conference on human rights adopted the Tehran Proclamation, recognizing that civil and political rights and economic and social rights are indivisible.

A decade later, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution promised freedom and prosperity for the poor and the dispossessed. It promised the religious masses social justice and an end to corruption. This is an important point of departure in understanding the far-reaching significance for democratization and human rights of the widespread protests across Iran, beginning on December 28 of last year. The thousands who poured onto the streets of villages and towns and cities across the country are the same impoverished masses that the Islamic Republic claims to have liberated from tyranny.

The July 2015 nuclear deal, concluded in Vienna, lifted crippling sanctions against Iran. The World Bank observed that shortly after, the economy bounced back sharply with a growth rate of 9.2% by the second quarter of 2016. President Rouhani promised that this would lead to greater prosperity and freedom. That promise has not materialized. It isn't difficult to understand why.

Iran's oil wealth has vanished, in part, because of extreme corruption among Iranian elites. In its 2017 corruption index, Transparency International ranked Iran 130th among nations. The economy is controlled by the Revolutionary Guards and the religious foundations, a fusion of autocratic violence and theocratic extremism sustained by a kleptocratic class. Much of that money is laundered in real estate markets in Toronto and Vancouver. The committee may recall the $2.6-billion embezzlement scandal involving Mr. Mahmoud Khavari in 2011, who obtained Canadian citizenship while serving as the CEO of Melli Bank in Iran. There are many others like him.

Iran's oil wealth has also vanished because of costly proxy wars aimed at exporting the revolution and the destruction of Israel. Iran's Quds Force and Lebanon's Hezbollah have played a direct military role in supporting the Assad regime. They have contributed to civilian atrocities that the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has qualified as crimes against humanity.

Elsewhere, Iraqi Shia militia have committed atrocities against Sunni civilians. In January, 2016 the Revolutionary Guards commander, Mohammad Jafari, celebrated the mobilization of nearly 200,000 armed youth across the region. All of this has cost Iran billions of dollars. Thus, while Iran's oil wealth sustains extravagant lifestyles and religious wars, Iranian youth suffer from an unemployment rate of 30%, according to World Bank statistics.

A prominent Iranian economist estimates that at least 26 million Iranians, or 33% of the population, live below the poverty line, and that 6%, or five million people, face starvation amidst rising prices, persistent unemployment, embezzlement, unpaid wages, bank collapses, and widening wealth disparity.

● (1310)

A noted expert has referred to the death spiral of the Iranian economy. This is the catastrophic toll of an authoritarian system without either transparency or accountability.

The situation is no longer sustainable. By way of example, on February 4 of this year, 3,500 steel workers in the city of Ahvaz went on strike to demand three months of unpaid salaries. On the same day, in the nearby city of Shush, a prominent labour activist demanded four months of unpaid salaries for 5,000 sugarcane workers. Where in the world, he asked, have you seen workers not being paid their miserable wages and then being forced, through police violence, to work? This is slavery.

This dire economic situation is exacerbated by severe climate change. The UN Development Programme warned in 2017 that, "Water shortages are acute; agricultural livelihoods no longer sufficient. With few other options, many people have left, choosing uncertain futures as migrants in search of work".

In January of this year, Iranian authorities killed farmers protesting mismanagement of water resources in villages around Isfahan. Many environmentalists have been imprisoned on vague grounds of national security. A particularly disturbing case that you referred to, Mr. Chair, is that of Iranian Canadian Professor Kavous Seyed-Emami, founder of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation. He was arrested on baseless charges of spying for Israel and the United States. On February 9, his wife, Maryam Mombeini, was informed that her husband had committed suicide in Tehran's Evin prison.

The family was pressured to keep quiet and to bury the body quickly. A request for an independent autopsy was denied. It calls to mind the notorious murder of Zahra Kazemi in the same Evin prison in 2003. On March 8, his wife was detained at Tehran airport and denied the right to leave for Canada together with her two sons. This is how the Iranian regime deals with a grieving widow.

Iran's dysfunctional judiciary has been at the forefront of punishing the innocent while rewarding the guilty. Iran's execution binge continues unabated. The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center has compiled a list of at least 524 executions in 2017, mostly public hangings, including death sentences against juveniles. Numerous dissidents continue to be imprisoned and tortured solely because of their religious or political beliefs. Even senior Islamic clerics such as Ayatollah Boroujerdi who calls for the separation of state and religion are silenced and persecuted.

Meanwhile, a culture of impunity prevails for the leadership's many crimes. Just yesterday, on April 30, a report by Amnesty International and Justice for Iran produced new evidence including satellite imagery, and photo and video analysis, demonstrating that the Islamic Republic has deliberately and systematically destroyed mass grave sites where at least 5,000 leftist political prisoners were secretly buried following Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa for their mass execution in 1988.

The members of the so-called "death commissions" that sent them to the gallows included Mostafa Pourmohammadi. In 2013, he was appointed minister of justice by President Rouhani. It also included Ebrahim Raisi who was appointed attorney general between 2014 and 2016.

● (1315)

He is now custodian of the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad, probably the wealthiest religious foundation, with an estimated $15 billion worth of assets. That is how the regime rewards those who commit crimes against humanity.

The Iranian leadership is on a collision course with the Iranian people. Instead of addressing their legitimate grievances, the regime is responding to increasing public anger with increasing violence. In this regard, the policies of so-called reformists and hardliners are not fundamentally different. In the words of a reformist, the protests have brought the two factions closer to each other "because at the end of the day we are all in the same boat." Many have abandoned hope of reform and have called for a referendum on a secular republic.

This disillusionment is with good reason. Recently, on April 23, at a talk before the American Council on Foreign Relations, foreign minister Javad Zarif denied the persecution of homosexuals while equating compulsory hijab for women with McDonalds' dress code prohibiting topless customers. He also claimed that being a Baha'i is not a crime. The Iranian judiciary would disagree with him. On the same day as his charm offensive in Washington, a court in Ahvaz sentenced Ms. Mitra Badrnejad to prison for the crime of "membership to the Baha'i religious organization". She joined the ranks of thousands of other Baha'is who have faced executions, torture, imprisonment, denial of employment and education, and destruction of their places of worship and cemeteries.

Ayatollah Khamenei has openly condemned them as untouchables. The obsessive hatred of Baha'is has extended to Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen, who have recently called for butchering Baha'is in what arguably constitutes incitement to genocide. As political unrest intensifies, the scapegoating of Baha'is could become much worse.

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the subcommittee, this is a time of great hope but also a time of great danger. Iran could go in many different directions in the coming months. The challenge is empowering the Iranian people to build a better future through non-violent means.

I thank you very much for your time and attention.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Akhavan.

We will now move straight to Mr. Dubowitz.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz (Chief Executive Officer, Foundation for Defense of Democracies): Thank you very much.

Chairman Levitt, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. It's a really great honour to be testifying with Payam, whose courageous work I greatly admire.

I applaud the committee for holding Iran to account for its poor human rights record especially at a time when the world seems obsessed with Iran's nuclear agreement and the happenings in Washington. That human rights record lies at the root of the regime's destabilizing behaviour across the region and its threat to the world.

I hope you have before you my written testimony. I'm going to summarize the basics as well as the policy recommendations.

The nationwide protests that Payam talked about began to consume Iran in late December. They reflect long-standing frustration with Tehran's repression, corruption, economic mismanagement, water shortages, and foreign adventurism. It's important to understand that the country has been witnessing hundreds of these protests over the past few years, but the latest demonstrations really mark the first major, widely covered eruption since the brutally repressed 2009 Green Revolution. These protests represent a potential inflection point in the clerical regime's long-term viability. The protestors have not only challenged specific policies but they're also challenging the government's very legitimacy as a representative of the Iranian people.

Chants of "death to Khamenei" and "death to Rouhani", referring to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and to President Hassan Rouhani, have routinely punctuated these mass demonstrations. The uprising also highlights the broken promises of President Rouhani, who rose to power in 2013. His re-election last year came with repeated pledges to end the regime's long-standing domestic repression. In 2016, he released a detailed charter on citizens' rights that vowed to advance fundamental democratic norms including freedom of speech, press, religion, and association, as well as fair trials, due process, and governmental transparency and accountability.

However, as the late Asma Jahangir, the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Iran, noted just before her death in February, improvements in Tehran's human rights record under Rouhani are "not forthcoming". Iran's actions, she wrote, "contrast starkly" with its rhetoric. The regime has continued to impose arbitrary arrests, large numbers of executions, restrictions on speech and assembly, torture in prison, and discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities. Rouhani, she said in an October 2017 press conference, is going to "have to walk the talk."

The protests have largely faded from the headlines in recent weeks but they continue to unfold throughout the country. In April, mass demonstrations began in the city of Kazeroon. "Our enemy is right here. They're lying when they say it's America!" protestors chanted. Demonstrators also gathered in Iran's Kurdish regions to highlight their economic plight. In Isfahan, protesters drew attention to chronic water shortages. In March, Iranians protested against the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, the regime's major propaganda organ. In recent days, Iranians have been protesting Tehran's censorship by writing anti-regime slogans on Iranian banknotes and posting them on Twitter.

As a noted expert observed, "A careful review of the evidence clearly indicates that the protests were not a short-lived phenomenon with temporary impact." Rather, they marked a turning point and permanent change in the trend of events and political calculations in Iran.

One must understand that this record of domestic repression stems not merely from the regime's ambition to keep and hold power but very much from the radical ideology that views the Islamic Republic as having revolutionary ambitions. Iran's human rights abuses reflect its determination to curb any behaviour at home that contravenes its religious world view and its regional and global ambitions. This reality underlies the systematic and pervasive reach of Iran's repressive state. The regime effectively rules through fear, employing imprisonment, torture, and executions to enforce its Islamist creed. It tolerates no dissent. It targets ethnic and religious minorities, journalists, and political activists. It seeks to control the public square by restricting Internet use, particularly social media. It arrests Iranians simply for criticizing their leaders online, and it dramatically limits the role of women, who face a range of discriminatory laws.

At the heart of this discrimination is Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the IRGC. This is the regime's praetorian guard. When Iranian citizens protested in 2009 and in 2017, it was the IRGC that arrested and killed demonstrators. The IRGC, created in 1979 to defend the Islamic Revolution at home and abroad, can incarcerate virtually anyone, anytime, for any reason, without consideration for human rights.

● (1320)

It controls ward 2A of Evin prison, where widespread and institutionalized torture of political prisoners routinely occurs.

My written testimony goes in great detail through a range of human rights atrocities. Payam has talked about some of them. I won't go into much detail on executions or on religious freedom, as this committee has heard much testimony on that.

On freedom of speech and the press, Reporters Without Borders has described Iran as one of the world's biggest prisons for media personnel.

The malign treatment of prisoners is actually worth detailing once again. They face horrific treatment in prison, marked by torture, poor sanitary conditions, and the denial of access to medical care. According to the former special rapporteur Asma Jahangir, imprisoned Iranians have experienced "sexual violence, including rape; blunt force trauma; positional torture; burns; sharp force; electric shocks; use of water...pharmacological torture; asphyxiation; amputation; sleep deprivation; threats and humiliation; and prolonged solitary confinement, including on the basis of ethnicity, religion, political views, or having transgressed expected social norms." Freedom from Torture, a London-based advocacy group, cites "widespread use and acceptance by the government of these interrogation and intimidation tactics."

Payam has detailed the repression and killing of Canadian Iranian dual nationals. Iran continues to hold at least 14 dual nationals and Iranians with permanent residence overseas on spurious charges.

Discrimination against Iranian women is widespread and pervasive, and on that front I would just highlight that child marriage is widespread in Iran. According to the former Iran special rapporteur, "at present, girls can be married as young as nine with the permission of the court. The United Nations Children Fund... reported...approximately 40,000 children under the age of 15 years are married annually and that approximately 17 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18."

I would be remiss in discussing Iran's domestic repression without talking about the Iranian regime's brutality in Syria, where their support for Bashar al-Assad has resulted in more than half a million deaths and created millions of refugees who have fled to Europe and neighbouring states. The regime reportedly spends about $15 billion a year to support its long-time partner in Damascus, including with arms. It has financed foreign militias, including the Lebanese Hezbollah. It provides between $700 million and $800 million to Hezbollah, which has provided the shock troops for the regime in Syria and contributed to the slaughter, and there are billions of dollars of credit and oil that it has supplied.

Let me return to some policy recommendations. I've detailed six policy recommendations in my testimony. Let me just summarize the first two.

The first is that pursuant to the Special Economic Measures Act, SEMA, the Canadian government should designate the IRGC in its entirety for its human rights violations in Iran and Syria, and impose human rights sanctions on Iranian state organs that facilitate the regime's human rights violations at home.

Last year, SEMA was amended to include an explicit new criterion that would enable sanctions against foreign actors that commit gross and systematic human rights violations. I would urge the Canadian government to designate the IRGC on that basis.

I would also urge the Canadian government to sanction under SEMA the business empire of Ali Khameini, the supreme leader, who is also the architect of Iran's oppression. This $200-billion corporate conglomerate controlled by the supreme leader consists of major companies and foundations, and it's also built on the backs of illegal expropriation of Iranian private property.

In addition, the Canadian government should use the new Magnitsky act, which allows the Governor in Council to take restrictive measures against foreign nationals responsible for gross human rights violations as well as corruption. This legislation gives the Canadian government the ability to sanction Iranian individuals and entities for gross human rights violations and corruption.

I will end there. There are other recommendations in my testimony, including listing the IRGC as a terrorist entity under the Canadian Criminal Code, as well as recognizing the clear nexus between the Iranian regime's human rights abuses and its other instruments of state repression.

Finally, Iran should maintain its listing under Canadian law as a state sponsor of terrorism under the Justice for Victims of Terrorism Act. This is the leading state sponsor of terrorism and has been recognized by numerous U.S. administrations, including those of Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

● (1325)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dubowitz. We're going to questions.

Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to both of our witnesses. We greatly appreciate all of the work you've done over the years in trying to hold Iran accountable.

If someone who is unfamiliar with this situation was listening to this, knew that this was Iran Accountability Week, and just listened to both Professor Akhavan's testimony and yours, Mr. Dubowitz, and heard this long list of forced labour, corruption, human rights violations, lack of religious freedom, illegitimate incarcerations, torture, murder, exportation of terror, even destroying the graves of people they've killed themselves, why would any country deal with Iran as a legitimate state?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: The answer is implicit in your question. The reality is we do deal with our enemies as well as our friends, but we should deal with our enemies with a clear-eyed view of the nature and gravity of the Iranian regime threat. The Canadian government and allied governments have a range of tools in order to try to change the conduct of this regime, but as Payam has said, the Iranian people themselves have lost faith in the ability of this regime to reform itself.

Certainly, as an international community, we need to use all our instruments of sanctions and other instruments of national power to try to affect the conduct of this regime, but I fear so far we've been a failure. We haven't actually changed the conduct of this regime. It has become more brutally repressive at home, and more aggressive and bloody abroad.

I am here asking the Canadian government, certainly asking parliamentarians, to ensure the Canadian government does not let up on any of the tools it has at its disposal in order to fundamentally change the nature and character of this regime.

● (1330)

Mr. David Sweet: Of course, the government did let up, as did many other nations, and removed sanctions. The testimony here today indicates that the economy increased substantially. I'd like your opinion on this.

Do you think that was part of the reason the Iranian regime was able to actually finance such a broad expansion of its exportation of terror through Iraq, over to Syria now, collaborating with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and threatening the gulf states?

Professor Akhavan.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: I will let Mr. Dubowitz go, and I will respond afterwards.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: That's exactly right. You actually saw a double-digit percentage increase in the Revolutionary Guards' budget right after the joint comprehensive plan of action was agreed to. There's no better indication of the regime's priorities than looking at its formal budget, which showed a prioritization for the Revolutionary Guards—the most repressive element of the Iranian system—not to mention this entire off-the-books budget.

I mentioned part of that, which is run by the supreme leader, called the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order...this $200-billion conglomerate which was built on the backs of Iranians. They actually illegally expropriated Iranian private property to build this real estate empire. There's no better indication of the Iranian regime's priorities than what it did after the JCPOA, where with over $100 billion in oil revenue, access to oil markets, and now an expanding economy, it prioritized the Revolutionary Guards, Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, the slaughter abroad, and the repression at home over the economic needs of their people.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Just to quickly add to what my friend Mark said, the lifting of the sanctions was linked only to the question of Iran's nuclear program, not to Iran's human rights abuses. Many of us have been saying for years that the nuclear issue should not eclipse the central issue, which is the nature of the regime and its systematic, violent repression of the Iranian people and their aspiration for a different future.

As I said in my testimony, the infusion of cash, which resulted in the lifting of the sanctions, has been diverted to all the wrong places. It explains why people no longer believe the promises they were given by President Rouhani, that with the lifting of the sanctions things would get better. There was a downward spiral, and it will only get worse.

I would like to echo what Mark said about the importance of targeted sanctions, of going after those centres of economic power, the Revolutionary Guards and the religious foundations, that, as I referred to in my testimony, sustain the regime. We need to understand the inextricable relationship between both the theocratic and the kleptocratic aspects of the regime. There is an economic mafia that also controls the security apparatus.

Only by going after those specific targets can we empower the Iranian people.

● (1335)

Mr. David Sweet: I have a last quick question. Both of you mentioned the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guards, but the other dirty little secret that usually does the "cleanup", to use a facetious term, is the Basij. You didn't mention the Basij. What's happening right now with that force, which usually terrorizes its own citizens during protests, etc.?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: The Basij are basically the plainclothes thugs of the IRGC. They are really an extension of the IRGC, just a different means of repression.

To add to what I said earlier, if we're really concerned about these concentrations of wealth and their impact on the Islamic Republic, we should also look into our own backyard, at the billions of dollars of dirty money right here in Canada in our real estate markets in Toronto and Vancouver. Many, many insiders have made Canada their home without any questions being asked. That has certain consequences. One of them is that these groups are buying influence and are very busy trying to whitewash the Islamic Republic's appalling human rights record.

So I think we need to clean up our own backyard as well try to project certain policies on the global stage.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: From a policy perspective, the Revolutionary Guards are also in control of the Quds Force, who are their overseas thugs, and the Basij, who are their domestic thugs. It's all the more reason why the Canadian government should designate, under SEMA, the Revolutionary Guards in their entirety for human rights abuses—the human rights abuses at home against the Iranian people and the gross human rights violations that the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guards are responsible for abroad, including, but not limited to, the slaughter that's taking place in Syria.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to MP Khalid, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their testimony today.

You know, one thing that really irks me, that really frustrates me, is a state or an organization telling a woman what she can or cannot wear, who she can or cannot marry, and what age she marries, basically treating them like chattel. We've seen across the world, in Canada and south of us, truly an empowerment of women and then a move toward more and more women's rights. It really heartened me to see such a movement in Iran as well in a protest that happened late last year.

Can you tell me, Mr. Dubowitz, what the impact of that protest was for women on the ground? Did it help them in terms of feeling more empowered or in terms of being more part of society, etc.? As well, what consequences did they face on the ground?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Iran's discrimination against women is clearly something that has provoked a serious backlash from Iranian women, and I think you've highlighted exactly one such incident when, on December 27, a woman, Vida Movahed, waved her white hijab from a stick on a busy Tehran street and she was arrested. She was a 31-year-old mother. That gesture went viral on social media. Many other Iranian women and men actually followed her lead in removing their hijabs. Since then Iranian authorities have arrested 30 women for refusing to wear the hijab in public.

In April there was a particularly notorious video that went viral that showed Iran's Basij, their domestic morality police, assaulting a woman whose head scarf only loosely covered her hair. I think what was reaffirming about this was the widespread outrage to this social media video from Iranians, women and men, not only in Iran but outside and worldwide.

The special rapporteur Jahangir has observed that husbands have an incontestable right to divorce. Married women cannot obtain a passport without permission from their husbands. Women in Iran remain unable to pass on their citizenship to their children—

● (1340)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Dubowitz, sorry, you have all of that listed in your brief, and I have read it and I really appreciate that—

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I appreciate someone's reading it.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: What I want to know is what is really the on-the-ground impact of that? I understand that President Rouhani signed an executive order to increase the number of women and youth in managerial positions and appointed a woman as deputy petroleum minister.

What is that relationship between the state and women on the ground? Has that actually transpired to some empowerment of women? Has that helped progress women's rights on the ground or not?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I think there are some cosmetic changes that are taking place, but these changes are not fundamental. If you look at government posts, 137 women were registered to run in Iran's presidential election. The Guardian Council, which screens loyalty to the regime, rejected all of them. Iran has never allowed any woman to serve on the 88-member Assembly of Experts of the Leadership, and that's the body that's tasked with appointing Iran's supreme leader.

Even the institutional changes, the political changes, have been cosmetic. The real power centres in Iran are barred to women. In terms of how this reflects on the ground, I think you've seen the frustration from Iranian women who recognize that Hassan Rouhani has not delivered on these promises, again, despite the rhetoric from his election in 2013. And it is fuelling exactly the anger you're seeing in these hijab protests as Iranian women are really risking their lives standing up against the regime and calling for greater freedoms.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I see in the recommendations you've provided in your brief that none of them are specific to women or to other vulnerable communities on the ground. If I may, maybe there are indirect impacts of such recommendations for women. Can you highlight those? If you were to make a specific recommendation, keeping in mind Canada's feminist international development policies and the way we conduct ourselves in general, what can Canada do to really provide assistance for the women of Iran in terms of empowering them, actions such as women's education, which has really shown statistically to be an empowering agent on the ground?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I think, first of all, speaking about these issues repeatedly and obsessively is absolutely critical, because without you and others in the Canadian government highlighting the plight of Iranian women, unfortunately, they will too often be ignored, and particularly ignored as the world focuses on Iran's nuclear program and other malign activity.

Under the Magnitsky act, you have a lot of discretion to target, designate, and sanction Iranian government officials who are responsible for repressing Iranian women and actually using Magnitsky and its authorities to not only call out this abuse, but actually penalize Iranian government officials, and judicial officials and others who are specifically responsible for gross human rights violations and particularly violations as they relate to the repression of Iranian women. You have those authorities, and I would strongly urge you to use them.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

In that same vein then, I know that you touched on LGBTQ2 rights within Iran a little bit. Obviously LBGTQ2 rights across the world are atrocious, and we're very lucky here in Canada to have such respect for all minorities. Specifically, in your recommendations—and also if you have any verbal recommendations—how do you think Canada should be dealing with and providing assistance to those communities?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Again, I think it's worth calling out Iranian leaders. For example, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, was recently in Washington and New York on what I would call a Iranian regime whitewashing tour. When asked about gay rights in Iran, he specifically denied the realities. The realities are that Iranian gays are executed for the crime of being gay. This was notoriously underscored by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when he was the Iranian president, who joked in New York that they had no gays in Iran. First of all, there's a large gay community, and second of all, to the extent that community is dwindling, it's because the Iran regime is repressing them and in some cases executing them. So I think first is to actually highlight that and call out the mendacity of leaders like Zarif.

The second is, again, that you have these authorities. I'm sorry to sound so repetitive, but you have SEMA and you have the global Magnitsky act. You have the ability to go after Iranian officials specifically for gross human rights violations, whether they be against LGBT or whether they be discrimination against Iranian women, ethnic minorities, or religious minorities. All of those authorities are provided to you under the act and under SEMA. Again, I would strongly urge you to use those authorities. A lot of people ask what the point is of designating Iranian officials for a range of human rights violations. I can tell you that it matters. It matters tremendously. I think Payam is exactly right. We did not focus on and prioritize human rights and LGBT rights and women's rights enough over the past decade. There was a focus on the hard elements of Iran's malign behaviour: the nuclear program, missiles, terrorism, and destabilizing behaviour. I think the Canadian government actually was a global leader on the issue of human rights. There probably wouldn't have been a UN special rapporteur on Iranian human rights without the support of the Canadian government, of both parties.

I would strongly urge you again to use your authorities, designate these individuals, name and shame them, apply visa bans, sanction their bank accounts. Payam is exactly right. There is a lot of Iranian regime money in this country. It is remarkable the amount of money laundering that is going on in Canada through real estate and through other mechanisms. The ability to actually target financial sanctions against those who are responsible for human rights abuses is tremendously powerful and would be consequential if it were actually being utilized.

● (1345)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to MP Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I'd like to thank our witnesses for bringing some very thought-provoking information to us today. We're well aware of the human rights abuses in Iran. I just want to continue on the conversational roll with Mr. Dubowitz.

You're talking about targeted sanctions and how we need to take these bolder steps now that we have our legislation in place. I guess I'll ask both of our witnesses if we can maybe have a little bit of candour from you, as we've already heard, with regard to the universal period review. Do you think that, if we're targeting in a different way or in a more vigilant way, we'll see a different response to recommendations that are put forward by the review? I think sometimes when we're following this issue we get cynical about the processes that are in place and the responsiveness. I'm wondering if you think it would be helpful or meaningful for the review to be something that is actually responded to.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: There is the cost-benefit calculus to human rights violations. Human rights abuses are an instrument by which the regime holds on to power, and an aspect of that power is military force and violence. Another aspect is the economic power and privileges of the inner circle. The question is, how can we ensure that abuses exact a cost?

The universal periodic review, I would say, is a sort of softer, less intrusive means of persuading Iran to improve its human rights record, but targeted sanctions exact a far higher cost. I think the regime would be much more responsive if it understood, in regard to very specific categories of violations, that they will pay a price, and that the price will be very direct and tangible.

Just by way of example, Ms. Khalid spoke about women's rights in Iran. Iran probably has the most vibrant feminist movement in the Middle East. Most of our human rights heroes are women such as Shirin Ebadi, Narges Mohammadi, who is in prison, and Nasrin Sotoudeh. The issue is not that people need to be educated in Iran, but that women need to be empowered, and they need to know that, when they are put in prison because they protested against compulsory hijabs or whatever the case may be, this issue will exact a cost in Iran's pursuit of its diplomatic and economic interests. I would go back to what my friend Mark has said about targeted sanctions.

● (1350)

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: If I could just flesh that out maybe more specifically, imagine a woman is put in jail, in Evin prison, for taking off her hijab, and we're able to determine who is responsible for that decision to put her into prison, to torture her, and to abuse her, and we identify that individual who's responsible for the repression. Now the question is, what do you do about that? Well, there's a name-and-shame element, which is to call out this individual and make sure we broadcast that far and wide.

Practically speaking, here are some of the things we can do to that individual. The first thing we can do is impose a travel ban. This would be a travel ban that means that individual cannot come to Canada. There would hopefully be a U.S. travel ban. We could hopefully work with our European friends on a European travel ban.

The question is, how do you enforce a travel ban, and how meaningful is it? If you attach secondary sanctions to that travel ban, then all of a sudden, you've created a situation where, if that individual tried to fly into Ottawa, Washington, or Berlin, then those sanctions could be applied against the company that is refuelling their plane. How do we know that works? When Foreign Minister Zarif landed in Frankfurt, as a result of sanctions, no private fuelling company would refuel his plane. This is the foreign minister of Iran. The German government had to order the German military to go and refuel his plane, so imagine the complications that this can cause.

You can have some real, practical impact. I mentioned financial sanctions. These are men—generally men—who not only want to travel abroad, but they want to move their money abroad. They want to move their money into safe havens, because they know, given the rial-dollar exchange rate, they may become increasingly poor if they keep their money in rials, so they want to do it in U.S. dollars and euros. Imagine if, as they are moving their money, we target those financial transactions, and we freeze those assets. We make sure that they can't launder their money through the Vancouver or Toronto real estate market or real estate markets in Europe and abroad where they're doing this.

These are the practical effects of targeted sanctions, and these are the kinds of sanctions that make a real difference, which you have the authority to impose as Canadian government officials.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I'm sure I'm running out of time, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: You have a minute.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Maybe somebody else will take up this, but one of the things we haven't really talked about here—and I think it's an important component, without getting too philosophical—is education and post-secondary education, the education system, Canada's role in international development and opportunities that we could be maximizing there, and what the realities are on the ground right now. It would be helpful to hear a little bit about that from either of you, or both.

The Chair: We'll have a short reply from one of the gentlemen, please.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: I'm not sure what you have in mind in terms of education. One of the problems is that Iran sees civil society as a threat. Iran has a very vibrant civil society. It's a youthful population there who are Internet-savvy. They're cosmopolitan, but they are severely repressed, they're imprisoned, and they're intimidated, so that is part of the problem. Development-type efforts all have to be filtered through the Revolutionary Guards and through the religious foundations, and that very seriously circumscribes what can be achieved.

The Chair: We're now going to go to MP Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you all for coming here. We're quickly running out of time, so I will try to be as quick as I can.

Most states that we discuss here in this committee have either been failed states or states with the same types of human atrocities that are happening in Iran, but I notice that Iran is different, as it's the largest economy in the Middle East and North Africa. The GDP is $412 billion, as Mr. Akhavan mentioned. However, Mr. Akhavan, in your testimony, you said that there's a 30% unemployment rate and 33% live below the poverty line.

With a country, as compared to the countries we've studied in this committee, it seems that.... As you mentioned corruption is very rampant. The funds I just mentioned right here aren't going to the people. I think you're seeing a lot of corruption at the top. With that come all these human rights abuses.

What can we do, as Canada, as a state, or with other states that have engaged with Iran on other talks, for example the U.K., France, China, and Russia? That's externally.

Internally, within civil society, how can we start developing more talks, so we can see a lot of these funds directed to the people, so they can flourish and have better prosperity in their country?

● (1355)

Dr. Payam Akhavan: That's a very good question for which there is no easy answer. Some years ago, before this subcommittee, I spoke about the Islamic Republic of Gangster Capitalism. There is an inextricable relationship between giving economic incentives to religious and security elites and their vested interest in repressing all dissent and ensuring that they maintain power.

The economic situation is a direct reflection of the lack of transparency and lack of accountability. In the long term, without a democratic transformation, it will be very difficult to persuade the regime not to spend billions of dollars in Syria and Iraq or to let it go into the pockets of regime insiders.

Having said that, I think that there are ways of reaching out to the Iranian people. There are outreach strategies, where the Canadian government can invest resources in efforts to empower civil society. With the age of the Internet, there are many creative possibilities. Canada can persuade the European Union, in particular, which has strong commercial interests in Iran, to raise issues of transparency and accountability. There are a range of softer and harder measures which could be taken, but once again, I go back to the role that Canada has played as one of the biggest money-laundering centres for regime insiders. I think we need to take a long and hard look at how we have been accessories to this extreme corruption and take measures against it.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I will pass on my remaining time to Mr. Fragiskatos. Before I do, I think external and internal measures would put a lot of pressure on the regime. I think that's how we can move forward on that.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Mr. Dubowitz, my question is for you. Like all my colleagues around the table, I share a real concern about the human rights situation in Iran, but I'm also concerned when the argument is made that regime change ought to be the focus in Iran.

We have seen what regime change meant in Iraq in 2003 and what it meant for the people of Iraq from a human rights perspective, but also the wider region.

Can you comment on the following? You wrote along with Reuel Marc Gerecht for *Bloomberg* a few years back. This is what you said—and I quote this also, in light of the fact that you're counselling the Canadian government to take a stronger approach, when it comes to imposing sanctions on Iran.

You said, as follows:

> If we are going to pursue tougher international sanctions against Iran, and we should, the goal should be regime change in Iran not stopping proliferation. In fact, regime change would make the idea of an Iranian bomb far more tolerable.

Can you explain what you mean by that?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: When I talk about regime change, I talk about the regime change that Payam was talking about.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm sorry to interrupt you. To be clear, you've advocated for regime change in a number of forums: *The Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, the*Ynetnews*—

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Correct. Many times. I can give you the whole list.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: There's more.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: We can talk afterwards. There's a whole long list.

Of course. At the end of the day, the only hope for the people of Iran, the only hope for the security of the region, and the only hope of mitigating the nuclear and missile threat to our homeland is that there has to be the end of the regime. That's not just me saying that, that's many Iranians saying that.

I subscribe to the Shirin Ebadi view of regime change, which was articulated in *Bloomberg* a few weeks ago when the Nobel Prize laureate and human rights lawyer said that there can be no regime transformation, there can only be regime change. What she called for is a secular constitution. She called for a referendum to get rid of the office of the supreme leader. She made it very clear that Hassan Rouhani and Javad Zarif, the so-called moderates, are incapable of actually bringing about the kind of positive changes for Iran—

● (1400)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It's 2 p.m. and I don't mean to interrupt. With all due respect, do you not see how, in advocating for regime change, you ignore the view that regime change would—not even arguably, almost certainly—completely destabilize Iran and pose all sorts of terrible human rights consequences for the people of Iran and for the wider region?

In counselling the Canadian government to impose stronger—

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Sir, I think you're—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: —sanctions on Iran, you're actually advocating, because of your arguments, that Canada come on board with a view to replacing the regime in Iran, which is quite concerning to me. If Canada was to go down that path, we would see the entire region destabilized. We're focused on human rights here. Human rights would really be undermined.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: May I answer?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Of course. Go ahead. I'm quite curious.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Thank you.

I think you have a conception of regime change, understandably so, of 500,000 mechanized U.S. troops invading Iran to take down the regime. I don't support that form of regime change. I opposed the Iraq war and I would oppose an Iran war of U.S. invasion.

I support the change of the regime as Shirin Ebadi, a Nobel Prize laureate, supports it. I support the change of regime that hundreds of thousands of Iranians, who were on the streets over the past couple of months, have actually called for. I support a peaceful transformation and a peaceful—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No military strikes at all? Because you've written in favour of military strikes.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I think of Iran like Barack Obama and Bill Clinton and other presidents. If the Iranian regime were to dash to a nuclear weapon and we had no way to stop it, except using military force, I would absolutely recommend that we use military force to stop an Iranian dash to a bomb. I assume you would, too. You probably would deny—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Are you in favour of Iran having a nuclear weapon?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Like me, you would—as a last effort, if nothing else worked and we had no other ability to stop a bomb—support military strikes as well. But we're not talking about military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities and a dash to a bomb. We're talking about the question of regime change.

As I said, I support a change in the regime: a peaceful change in the regime in the way that Shirin Ebadi and hundreds of thousands of Iranians support it, which is a peaceful, secular constitution, the end of the supreme leader as an office and as a man who is responsible for brutal repression at home and gross human rights violations abroad.

If I take your argument to its logical conclusion, what you're actually saying is if we have a brutal regime, we should do nothing to change it. We should leave it in place.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No, you have misunderstood my argument entirely.

The Chair: We're right short on time. We've got a minute and a half left for MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I wish we had more time to talk about this.

You talked quite a bit about Canada's role in financing Iranian investment in Canada. This is going to be asked in a neutral fashion deliberately. Is there anybody in Canada who stands out as being most active in handling those investments, who we might consider talking to and inviting in as a witness to this committee?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: That's a question I personally would have to reflect on very carefully. There are individuals who have quite detailed knowledge about movements of money, and resources, and particular cliques that have set up camp in Canada. I'd be happy to speak to the subcommittee further about that.

Mr. David Anderson: Perhaps the subcommittee should take some interest in that in the future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, and with it being after two o'clock, I'm going to thank both of our esteemed guests for being here today and starting our two hearings this Iran Accountability Week. This has been quite riveting testimony.

I know that as we move forward with statements in the House and the work of Professor Cotler and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre, we're going to be able to reflect further on how Canadian Parliament can address the issues of ongoing human rights abuses in Iran.

I thank both of you and all the members very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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